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**FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE**

**Ducks Unlimited to Plant Record Number of Trees in Arkansas**

MEMPHIS, Tenn., July 11, 2005 – Thanks to the Wetland Reserve Program (WRP), Ducks Unlimited (DU) is gearing up to plant more than four million trees on 13,000 to 14,000 acres in Arkansas within the next year. The effort marks the largest bottomland hardwood restoration project ever undertaken by DU in Arkansas.

“On average, DU plants about 6,000 acres of trees per year in Arkansas, but this year, thanks to increased funding and a more public appreciation of conservation work in these areas, DU is able to do more now than ever before for the flood-prone lowlands of the natural state,” explained Craig Hilburn, director of conservation programs for DU in Arkansas.

Funding for the program comes from WRP, a voluntary program administered by the USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS). WRP provides financial and technical assistance to landowners wanting to restore and conserve wetlands on their property. Each year, DU works with the NRCS to implement WRP by providing trees, site preparation, planting and supervision. DU also constructs shallow wetlands on WRP lands to attract waterfowl and other wetland dependent wildlife.

“Most of the trees we’re planting will be on croplands enrolled in WRP in eastern Arkansas along the Mississippi, Arkansas, and White rivers,” Hilburn explained.

DU will also plant in southwest Arkansas along the Red River and Little River. Croplands enrolled in WRP are planted with bottomland hardwood tree species, which are native to the area.



**Bottomland hardwood forests provide critical habitat for waterfowl and other wildlife, including the recently rediscovered ivory-billed woodpecker.**

“Over 70 species of trees occur naturally in bottomland hardwood forests,” said Phil Covington, regional biologist for Ducks Unlimited in Arkansas. “Our plan is to plant several species of oak such as Nuttall, overcup, willow oaks, water oaks and more. We’ll also plant sugarberry, green ash and many other soft mast species. The trees of bottomland hardwood forests provide a great service to Arkansas because they ultimately filter out sediments and nutrients that would otherwise end up in Arkansas’ rivers. Our goal is to help bring these areas back to their natural functions and values that provide excellent wintering habitat for ducks.”

Since 1984, Ducks Unlimited has worked to restore bottomland hardwood forests in the south. These ecosystems provide crucial habitat for millions of migrating and wintering waterfowl every year. Arkansas is the prime wintering habitat for mallards in the Mississippi Flyway. In addition to foraging habitat, bottomland hardwoods provide thermal refuge and pair-isolation habitat for wintering waterfowl. Several fish species, including the endangered paddlefish, also depend on bottomlands for spawning each year.

“We should really thank the ivory-billed woodpecker though, for bringing bottomland hardwood forests to the forefront of public conservation priorities,” Covington said. “With the recent rediscovery of the ivory-billed woodpecker, people are realizing how important it is to conserve these dwindling habitats. Ivory-billed woodpeckers depend on bottomland hardwood forests for their very existence.”

In the Mississippi Alluvial Valley, where the ivory-billed woodpecker once thrived, the United States has lost more than 80 percent of its original bottomland hardwood forests.

“As a result, we thought we’d lost the ivory-billed woodpecker forever,” Covington added. “We’ve been given a second chance to conserve these habitats, and it’s DU’s pleasure to help do just that.”

The NRCS is doing its part as well. Since 1995, the NRCS has enrolled 185,000 acres in the WRP.

“Over 45 percent, or 85,000 acres, of the WRP lands are in the White River and Cache River floodplains, in the core of the Mississippi Alluvial Valley,” explained Kalven Trice, State Conservationist with the NRCS. “When asked, ‘what is NRCS going to do for the Ivory Billed Woodpecker?’ our answer is simple, what we have been doing for the past 10 years in WRP, restoring marginal cropland back to essential wetlands. We were committed to restoring wetlands before the discovery of the Ivory-Billed woodpecker, and we will maintain our commitment into the future.”

Since DU first started working with the NRCS on this project in 1996, the organization has planted 62,000 acres of trees in Arkansas alone.

“This is critical habitat that wouldn’t be there without the NRCS and WRP,” Covington said. “It’s a privilege to be a part of it all, and to see first-hand the difference it makes for waterfowl and other wildlife.”

With more than a million supporters, Ducks Unlimited is the world’s largest wetlands and waterfowl conservation organization. The United States alone has lost more than half of its original wetlands – nature’s most productive ecosystems – and continues to lose more than 100,000 wetland acres each year.

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*Look for Ducks Unlimited on the World Wide Web at [www.ducks.org](http://www.ducks.org). Tune in to The World of Ducks Unlimited Radio Network, and watch Ducks Unlimited Television on the Outdoor Life Network (OLN).*